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A drug called comparison

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CHAPTER 7

General discussion

Burnout constitutes a serious societal problem, and can be described as a state of mental exhaustion due to chronic stress in the work situation (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Social comparison processes tend to play an important role in coping with health problems (e.g., Buunk & Gibbons, 1997; Tennen, McKee, & Affleck, 2000) and, as the present dissertation testified, this also applies to individuals suffering from burnout. Social comparison occurs when one compares oneself with other people, that is, when one relates information about other individuals to one's own situation. This dissertation dealt with social comparison processes among individuals with varying levels of burnout and centered around the following major questions: Are individuals in a state of burnout still capable, like healthy people, of preserving a positive view of themselves vis-à-vis others? Can they be inspired by successful others in the same way as healthy people? How do they respond to confrontation with unfortunate others? And can they benefit from comparison with self-chosen or imaginary others? By addressing these issues, this dissertation aimed to give more insight in the development and persistence of burnout, and to provide suggestions for the treatment of burnout.

The research population in this dissertation consisted of teachers in secondary education, a profession that has the reputation of being particularly plagued by burnout (e.g., Rudow, 1999). Burnout percentages of 20% are not uncommon in secondary education, and these percentages are relatively high in comparison with other social professions (Taris, Schaufeli, Schreurs, & Caljé, 2000). In addition, teaching seems to give ample opportunity for social comparison, for instance in the staff room, where teachers discuss their daily experiences. Teachers in the Netherlands may currently even experience a heightened tendency to engage in social comparison because of the recent reforms in education. These reforms seem to have raised feelings of uncertainty (Tweede Fase Adviespunt, 2001), a factor that is known to increase the need for social comparison information (Festinger, 1954; Molleman, Pruyn, & Van Knippenberg, 1986).

(When) is it appropriate to treat burnout as a unidimensional concept?

Burnout is commonly viewed as a syndrome consisting of three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment. Before studying burnout in relation to social comparison, it was important to examine the question whether and when it is appropriate to treat burnout as a unidimensional or dichotomous variable, rather than reporting results separately for each burnout dimension. Chapter 2 aimed to provide guidelines for the presentation of results obtained with the Maslach Burnout Inventory by illustrating the advantages and disadvantages of different conceptualizations of burnout. As such, this chapter may have methodological implications for researchers in the field of burnout. In this field of research, findings are often presented for each burnout dimension separately, an approach that may complicate results sections considerably. Nevertheless, this approach respects the multidimensionality of burnout and is the appropriate procedure for researchers interested in the underlying dimensions of burnout, such as researchers investigating phase models or the differential effects of the dimensions on other variables. When one is primarily interested in differences between individuals high and low in burnout, however, it may be more appropriate to combine the dimensions. This improves the understandability and clarifies the results, especially when complex interaction effects are studied. Moreover, from a theoretical viewpoint, it is important to note that researchers have proposed burnout as a specific *syndrome*, thereby underlining the importance of an overall conceptualization of burnout.

Not only did Chapter 2 provide guidelines for choosing between a unidimensional and multidimensional conceptualization of burnout, it also discussed several ways to combine the burnout dimensions into a single burnout score. To obtain a dichotomous burnout score, the 'Exhaustion + 1' criterion is recommended for non-clinical populations. Following this criterion, individuals can be considered as burnt-out when they report, compared to a norm group, high emotional exhaustion, in combination with high depersonalization or low personal accomplishment. This criterion is useful for computing burnout percentages in samples and for investigating differences between individuals low and high in burnout. Nonetheless, the group with burnout is often too small or its variance is too large for reliable analyses, and in these cases, it seems better to employ a continuous burnout scale. Yet, more research is needed about the most accurate way in which the dimensions can be combined into a continuous score, although a few

studies have obtained internally consistent burnout scales by summing up all the items of the Maslach Burnout Inventory. In the current dissertation, the conceptualization of burnout varied among studies, as the studies themselves differed with respect to their scope, the complexity of the research design, or the specific characteristics of the sample that was used.

Considered as a whole, by discussing different conceptualizations of burnout, Chapter 2 provided guidelines for the presentation of results obtained with the Maslach Burnout Inventory. Researchers who are primarily interested in differences between individuals high and low in burnout may treat burnout as a unidimensional concept, rather than reporting results separately for each underlying dimension. It is recommended that the choice for a specific conceptualization of burnout not only depend upon one's main research interest, but also on the complexity of one's design and the distributional properties of one's sample.

Do individuals in a state of burnout preserve a positive view of themselves vis-à-vis others?

Individuals generally experience a sense of superiority vis-à-vis other people: They believe, for instance, that they are brighter and more honest than most other individuals (see for a review Hoorens, 1993). Yet, would individuals suffering from burnout be capable of evaluating themselves in such a favorable way, given their low level of mental health and their reduced sense of personal accomplishment? Chapter 3 sought to explore whether individuals in a state of burnout manage to preserve a positive view of themselves vis-à-vis other people. Special attention was hereby paid to the question if burnout is distinct from depressive symptomatology in the perception of being superior to others. This question is important because it can shed more light on the way in which burnout differs from depression, two concepts that share some important characteristics, in particular with respect to the dimension of emotional exhaustion (Glass & McKnight, 1996).

It was expected that in the case of depression, feelings of superiority would be more reduced than in the case of burnout. A prominent feature of depressed individuals is that they have a reduced perception of being better than most others (see Buunk & Brenninkmeijer, 1999). Moreover, the clinical picture of depression seems to indicate more defeat and less vitality

than the clinical picture of burnout (see Hoogduin, Schaap, & Methorst, 1996). As hypothesized, a reduced sense of superiority appeared to be more characteristic of depression than of burnout: The relation between superiority and the core symptom of burnout, emotional exhaustion, was not even significant. Furthermore, especially among individuals with a reduced sense of superiority, burnout was accompanied by depressive symptomatology. It seems then that burnout may develop into a depression, and that this is particularly true when one loses a sense of superiority vis-à-vis one's colleagues. However, prospective research would be necessary for rigorous testing of this reasoning. The present study may nevertheless be valuable for researchers in the field of burnout by identifying an important difference between depression and burnout and by proposing a potential mechanism through which burnout might develop into a depression.

In Chapter 4, it was examined to what extent positive superiority (feeling better than others) and negative superiority (feeling less bad than others) are reduced in the case of burnout. The distinction between these two types superiority is important, because one may assume that negative superiority can be more easily maintained than positive superiority (Van Lange & Breukelaar, 1992). As negative behavior of others generally attracts a lot of attention (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989), people may be well able to bring instances of other people's negative behavior to their mind, even when they feel that their own functioning has deteriorated. Negative superiority appeared indeed intact among individuals in a state of burnout: With respect to negative behaviors, downward comparison information was rich in content and could be quickly generated as compared to upward comparison, even among individuals in a state of burnout. With regard to positive behaviors, this tendency was reduced among those in a state of burnout, indicating that positive superiority was reduced in the case of burnout. This finding raised the question if reduced perceptions of 'being better than others' may cause or aggravate burnout. Burnout candidates may perhaps exhaust themselves in order to preserve a sense of superiority, or even a sense of grandiosity, as proposed by Fischer (1983). However, it seems most likely that perceptions of superiority and burnout reinforce each other in a circular relationship.

Chapter 4 may have methodological implications for research on perceived superiority, as the method described in this chapter is, to the best of our knowledge, one of the first to use response latencies for measuring perceived superiority. A relatively unobtrusive method to assess perceptions

of superiority may invite future studies to further examine perceptions of superiority, notably unconscious perceptions of superiority or inferiority. Moreover, implicit methods of superiority might be used to measure subtle changes or fluctuations in superiority that occur outside awareness. In research on self-esteem, fluctuations in self-esteem (e.g., Kernis, 1993; Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998) and implicit levels of self-esteem (e.g., Koole, Smeets, Van Knippenberg, & Dijksterhuis, 1999), in particular discrepancies between implicit and explicit levels of self-esteem (see Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000), seem promising to further our understanding of personality traits and behaviors related to self-esteem, such as narcissism. Likewise, researchers in the field of perceived superiority may benefit from the development of implicit measures of superiority.

In light of the findings discussed in Chapter 4, one may wonder what it actually means to feel less bad than others, and in what way this differs from feeling better than others. The two kinds of superiority can be related to the distinction between self-protection and self-enhancement (e.g., Baumeister, 1993; Tice, 1993). Negative superiority may be interpreted as a kind of self-protection, whereby one avoids being worse than others or avoids an inferior position in the hierarchy. In contrast, positive superiority may be viewed as a kind of self-enhancement, whereby one aims to be better than others or strives for a superior position in the hierarchy. In a study on self-serving comparisons with self-generated others (see Chapter 6), the distinction between self-protection and self-enhancement, and in particular the potential benefits of self-protective comparisons, were further elaborated.

To conclude, individuals suffering from burnout do not experience a lack of superiority to the same extent as individuals with depressive complaints. Moreover, although the perception of ‘being better than others’ is reduced among individuals in a state of burnout, these individuals still view themselves as ‘being less bad than others’. By introducing a relatively unobtrusive method based on response latencies for measuring superiority, further research on perceptions of superiority may be stimulated. In addition, it is suggested that perceptions of superiority may have an impact upon the development of burnout.

How do individuals in a state of burnout respond to confrontation with others?

An important issue in this dissertation concerned the reactions to forced comparison information, that is, to comparison information that is imposed upon individuals. In Chapter 5, it was explored how individuals respond to confrontation with a well or poorly performing colleague. As expected, burnout affected the capacity to use comparison information in a favorable way, in particular, to derive positive affect from upward comparison and to avoid negative affect from downward comparison. With increasing levels of burnout, upward comparison appeared to evoke also more negative affect. These findings were generally in accordance with studies on the effects of forced comparison in relation to perceived control (Ybema & Buunk, 1995) and neuroticism (Van der Zee, Buunk, & Sanderman, 1998), and also with a recent study among sociotherapists with varying levels of burnout (Buunk, Ybema, Gibbons, & Ipenburg, 2001). In addition, the findings in Chapter 5 appeared particularly convincing because they have been obtained with both a retrospective method as well as an experimental method, whereby individuals were presented a scenario about a well or poorly performing colleague. Hence, there is increasing evidence that various aspects of mental health influence the capacity to use imposed social comparison information, both upward and downward, in a self-serving way.

Identification with a well functioning colleague appeared to be an important mediating variable with respect to the positive affective consequences of upward comparison. That is to say, individuals high in burnout derived less positive affect from upward comparison because they focused less on similarities and viewed the other's position as a less probable future for themselves. Thus, with respect to upward comparison, identification explained the effect of burnout on positive affect. As predicted, these individuals also reported more identification with a downward target than individuals low in burnout, but this explained only partially their negative affective reaction to downward comparison. It is an issue for future research what processes, besides identification-contrast, can account for the affective consequences of downward comparison. It might hereby be fruitful to differentiate between the specific emotions that arise from downward comparison, such as fear, worry, pity, pride or contempt. According to Smith (2000), these different emotional reactions would

depend upon the focus of attention, that is, whether the attention is primarily focused on oneself, on the other person, or on both.

What can conclusions can be drawn with respect to the theorizing on social comparison? The finding that individuals in a state of burnout generally respond unfavorably to confrontation with downward others is in contradiction with Wills' downward comparison theory (1981). According to Wills, individuals under stress would benefit from downward comparison by realizing that one's own position is not so bad after all (see Wheeler, 2000). However, as noted by Buunk and Ybema (1997), downward comparison information may be threatening when it concerns vivid, rather than abstract information. Taylor and Lobel (1989) proposed that individuals under stress would prefer information about and contact with upward others, who can serve as sources of inspiration, although they would prefer to evaluate themselves in comparison with worse-off others. In line with this reasoning, we found that confrontation to upward others generally evoked more favorable reactions than confrontation to downward others. Nevertheless, for individuals suffering from burnout upward comparison was less inspiring, and resulted in more negative affect, than for healthy individuals.

What are the implications for researchers in the field of burnout? The present findings demonstrate the importance of taking the social context of burnout into account and, in particular, of considering the impact of social comparison information upon individuals' well-being (see also Buunk & Schaufeli, 1993). Individuals are on a daily basis confronted with information about others, such as via the media or through friends, but also via the work situation (e.g., Goodman, 1977). As these comparisons are generally unpleasant for individuals suffering from burnout, the effects of frequent exposure to unwanted comparison information may accumulate into an important stressor. By paying attention to the influence of these unfavorable social comparisons, researchers may further their understanding of the social context in which burnout and other stress-related disorders develop and persist. In addition, future research may want to explore the harmful long-term effects of this stressor on individuals' level of well-being and burnout. A recently undertaken longitudinal study highlights the role of social comparisons upon the development of professional burnout and role stress among nurses (Buunk, Zurriaga, Peíro, & Belmonte, in press). The amount of positive affect derived from upward comparison appeared to predict a decrease in burnout, whereas the amount

of negative affect derived from upward comparison predicted an increase in role stress.

In sum, burnout affects the capacity to use imposed social comparison information in a favorable way: With increasing levels of burnout, confrontation with a successful other evoked less positive affect and confrontation with an unsuccessful other evoked more negative affect. Identification-contrast processes appeared to explain the positive affective consequences of upward comparison. These findings hint at the possible long-term impact of frequent exposure to social comparison information and demonstrate the value of considering individuals' social context in research on burnout and other stress-related disorders.

Can individuals suffering from burnout benefit from comparison with self-generated others?

A final question addressed in this dissertation was whether individuals in a state of burnout can enhance the satisfaction with their professional performance through reflecting in a self-protective way on their own qualities in comparison with self-generated others, a type of comparison that offers more possibility for self-serving distortion than comparison with imposed targets. In a thought-generating task, teachers were asked to list dimensions on which they were doing well (i.e., self-enhancement) or not poorly (i.e., self-protection) compared to other teachers. Self-protection can be assumed to be a particularly important motive for individuals suffering from burnout. Given their reduced sense of accomplishment and low self-esteem, they may fear that they are, or will be in the future, inferior to others. Moreover, obtaining a sense of superiority may be 'aiming too high' for these individuals. As expected, individuals in a state of burnout derived more satisfaction with their performance as a teacher and more positive affect from comparing themselves in a self-protective way, rather than in a self-enhancing way, with self-generated others.

The findings in Chapter 6 may contribute to the theorizing on the two fundamental, evolutionary adaptive motivational systems that underlie approach and avoidance tendencies (Elliott, 1999). In the literature on goal orientations, approach (e.g., aiming to win from others) and avoidance (e.g., avoiding to lose from others) are the equivalents of enhancement and protection. A variety of studies suggest that, prior to or during a task, these kinds of approach strategies are associated with better performance than

avoidance strategies (Elliott, 1999; Elliott & McGregor, 2001, cf. Midgley et al., 2001). The current findings, however, illustrate the beneficial impact of avoidance strategies when one evaluates oneself, after completion of a task. Especially for individuals suffering from burnout, evaluating one's performance with a protective, defensive strategy seems to be an effective way of emotion-focused coping, with short-term benefits and possibly long-term effects as well. The sense of satisfaction and the positive feelings derived from this strategy might help individuals to ease the pressure on themselves, to engage in broad-minded coping (e.g., Fredrickson, 1998), and hence to combat burnout. Longitudinal research would be necessary to examine the long-term effects of this strategy on burnout and professional performance.

What are the theoretical implications for research in the field of social comparison? Firstly, by showing the differential effects of self-construed comparisons with a self-protective or a self-enhancing focus, Chapter 6 underscores the importance of distinguishing between these two self-serving focuses. In the literature on comparison with self-fabricated others (e.g., Goethals & Klein, 2000), self-protection and self-enhancement are often not discerned. Instead, the overall motive of 'feeling good about oneself' is proposed as the main reason for engaging in construed comparisons, a motive that may not be interpreted by everyone in the same way, as the findings in Chapter 6 and the literature on self-esteem (e.g., Baumeister, 1993; Tice, 1993) suggest. By specifying the two kinds of self-serving motives, researchers may gain more insight in the consequences of self-construed comparisons upon individuals' well-being. This may be particularly true when researchers examine the effects of construed comparisons in relation to self-esteem, or in relation with constructs that are associated with low self-esteem, such as depression and burnout. The strength of the motives for self-protection and self-enhancement may vary as a function of individuals' self-esteem, and may determine the consequences of self-protective and self-enhancing comparisons.

Secondly, Chapter 6 shows how important the distinction is between self-generated and imposed comparison targets. Whereas imposed comparison targets, in particular downward targets (see Chapter 5), evoked unfavorable reactions among individuals in a state of burnout, these individuals were able to benefit from self-generated targets, at least, when they thought about the dimensions on which they were doing not poorly. One may conclude then that Wills' downward comparison theory (1981) is

particularly true for self-generated comparison targets. That is, individuals under stress may benefit from downward comparison when they are free to generate the targets themselves, rather than when they are confronted with unfortunate others. As such, the findings seem particularly in line with Taylor and Lobel (1989) who proposed that individuals under stress would benefit from evaluating themselves against worse-off others, but would try to avoid actual contact with these others. It should be noted, however, that in the present study it was not examined whether individuals indeed generated downward comparisons. Although the occurrence of downward comparisons may seem plausible given the instructions to list dimensions on which one is doing well or not poorly, it cannot be excluded that individuals sometimes thought of upward or lateral others.

In conclusion, individuals in a state of burnout are capable of benefiting from comparing themselves with self-generated others in a self-protective way, rather than in a self-enhancing way. They derive more satisfaction with their performance and more positive affect from concentrating on the dimensions on which they were not doing poorly compared to others, rather than on the dimensions on which they were doing well compared to others, a finding that may have theoretical implications for research on achievement goal orientations and for research on self-construed comparisons.

What is the role of individual differences in social comparison orientation?

Not everybody is equally inclined to compare oneself with others (e.g., Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). An important question in the present dissertation was if the dispositional need for social comparison, the so-called comparison orientation, influences reactions on forced social comparison. On the basis of earlier research (see Gibbons & Buunk, 1999) it was expected that the effects of social comparison would be more pronounced among individuals with a strong comparison orientation. Indeed, among these individuals a stronger association was found between burnout and positive feelings following upward comparison, and in Study 1 also between burnout and negative feelings after upward comparison (Chapter 5). It appeared that social comparison orientation did not influence the extent to which one identified with a superior other, but determined the amount of positive affect one derived from identification with this person.

Social comparison orientation also appeared to influence the responses to comparison with self-generated others: Especially individuals with a strong social comparison orientation benefited from focusing on the dimensions on which they were not doing poorly.

Still, it is puzzling that social comparison orientation moderated the impact of burnout only with respect to some, and not to all responses to comparison information. Why did social comparison orientation exert no moderating effect on the affective responses to imposed downward comparison, or on identification-contrast processes, as was the case in a recent study among sociotherapists by Buunk, Ybema et al. (2001)? Buunk, Ybema et al. (2001) found that only among individuals with a strong social comparison orientation, confrontation with an upward target evoked less identification and confrontation with a downward target evoked more negative affect as individuals experienced stronger feelings of burnout. Perhaps the specific comparison needs of the populations under study or the specific features of the employed scenarios are responsible for the different effects of social comparison orientation. Future research may want to address the specific conditions that are necessary for moderating effects of social comparison orientation to occur.

Although only some responses to social comparison were affected by social comparison orientation, the obtained effects highlight the importance and uniqueness of this individual difference variable. Social comparison orientation is associated with neuroticism and with an anxious-avoidant attachment style, and is inversely related to self-esteem (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999), but the current findings underline that social comparison orientation cannot be equated with these related constructs. For instance, whereas neuroticism has been associated with a diminished ability to benefit from upward comparisons (Van der Zee, Buunk, & Sanderman, 1998), individuals with a strong social comparison orientation interpret upward comparison information in a particularly favorable manner, at least when they are low in burnout. Hence, the role of individual differences in social comparison orientation seems to be unique and to surpass the influence of related constructs, such as neuroticism.

What are the theoretical implications of these findings for social comparison research? The findings indicate that the meaning of social comparison information may depend upon individuals' level of social comparison orientation. People who are in need for social comparison information are not only more inclined to interpret a situation as a social

comparison situation (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999), but also respond differently to social comparison than individuals who are not in need for this information. How these responses differ between these two types of individuals is an intriguing issue, whereby those high in social comparison orientation sometimes respond more favorably and sometimes less favorably than those low in social comparison orientation. Given the complex, but important role of social comparison orientation, researchers studying the beneficial or detrimental effects of social comparison information are recommended to distinguish between individuals high and low in social comparison orientation.

In a nutshell, social comparison orientation influenced reactions to confrontation with successful others as well as responses to comparisons with self-generated others. The obtained results witness the importance of taking individual differences in social comparison orientation into account and of paying attention to the complex mechanisms via which these differences influence reactions to social comparisons.

What are the limitations of the present dissertation?

The research conducted in the present dissertation has some limitations that should be considered. A first limitation is that, by covering a broad range of social comparison processes and by employing various paradigms, this thesis has not explored each comparison process in full depth. There are still questions raised by the studies in this dissertation that need to be answered, such as “Can self-protective comparisons with self-generated others help to combat burnout?”. In addition, replication studies are necessary to validate the results that have been described in this dissertation. Hence, to fully address a research question about a specific social comparison theme, additional studies will be necessary. Although a more limited research scope would have facilitated more in-depth research, the present thesis has the merit of sketching a broad picture of the various ways in which individuals suffering from burnout compare themselves with others. Consequently, this dissertation may stimulate further studies on a variety of issues in social comparison research.

A second limitation is that social comparison processes were studied in a general population, instead of in a clinical population. Despite substantial burnout percentages in the collected samples, this may have lead to an underrepresentation of individuals in a severe state of burnout. Would the

results have been different if more severely burnt-out individuals had been examined? One might expect that those individuals would have reported a stronger lack of superiority and would have responded with even more negative affect and less positive affect to imposed comparisons. Yet, it is difficult to predict whether those individuals, compared to milder cases of burnout, would have benefited to a larger or to a lesser extent from self-protective comparison with self-generated others, an issue that seems particularly worth studying given the potential implications for the treatment of burnout.

A third limitation of the present dissertation is that more extensive use could be made of implicit measures, such as the one described in Chapter 4, rather than explicit measures. The drawback of explicit measures is that individuals are not always aware, or are not always able to report, what they are feeling or thinking (Brewin, 1993). Relatedly, another disadvantage is that the explicit responses of the participants may have been influenced to a larger extent by demand characteristics, as these responses allow for more control and reflection. Still, the interaction effects that appeared between burnout, social comparison orientation, and the experimental conditions suggest that the reported responses reflect at least to some extent individuals' genuine reaction. That means, demand characteristics cannot account for the specific differences between conditions, or for the moderating role of burnout and social comparison orientation. Furthermore, it should be noted that implicit measures also have drawbacks. Bosson et al. (2000) have found no correlations between various implicit measures of self-esteem, and have questioned the reliability and validity of these implicit measures. Hence, it is not always clear what implicit measures actually measure. Moreover, in field research, the use of computers to measure response latencies is a much more laborious method than the use of paper-and-pencil measures.

What are the practical implications of this dissertation?

This thesis may have practical implications for the therapeutic treatment of burnout. Firstly, it is proposed that therapists may make use of the beneficial effects of social comparison with self-generated others. Encouraging clients to compare themselves with self-chosen or self-construed (i.e., imaginary) others may foster positive feelings and increase the satisfaction with one's performance. It is hereby crucial, however, that

clients focus on the aspects on which they are not doing poorly, rather than on the aspects on which they are doing well, compared to others. Secondly, therapists are recommended to pay attention to the nefarious effects of forced social comparisons, in particular among clients with a strong social comparison orientation. Possibly, one can teach clients how to deal more effectively with comparison information that is imposed upon them. Although not examined in the current dissertation, individuals might learn to evade certain situations in which they are confronted with unfavorable comparison information, or they might learn how to discount certain types of comparison information. For instance, analogous the challenging of dysfunctional beliefs in cognitive therapy (e.g., Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979) or rational emotive therapy (Ellis, 1962), one may ask individuals how relevant or helpful a specific comparison is. Clients might also learn to focus on those features of imposed comparison information that help to improve their functioning. For example, they may concentrate their attention on the way in which successful people manage their time.

Not only in the therapeutic treatment of burnout, also in the working environment, individuals may benefit from paying attention to social comparison processes. Given the impact of social comparisons, one may try to provide employees with the comparison information that they need or would like to encounter. Albeit these issues were not addressed in the present thesis, carefully designed teams, mentor systems, or intervision groups, such as 'junior circles', can offer individuals the opportunity to evaluate, to enhance, or improve themselves. In recruitment policies too, social comparison needs may be taken into consideration. By appointing women to high positions, for example, one may offer other women successful models with whom they can identify.

In general, this dissertation indicates that one should be careful in providing unsolicited social comparison information to individuals suffering from burnout. These individuals may be hurt by stories about worse-off others, as these stories may evoke negative feelings and may represent a possible future for oneself. Similarly, Taylor, Aspinwall, Giuliano, Dakof, and Reardon (1993) have demonstrated that cancer patients may feel psychologically distressed after hearing negative stories from friends or relatives about fellow patients (see also Ybema & Buunk, 1995). Although information about better-off others generally fosters more hope and encouragement than information about worse-off others (Taylor et al. (1993); Ybema & Buunk, 1995), other people's success may also evoke

negative affect and may be seen as unattainable for oneself. Hence, even with the best of intentions, offering non-requested downward or upward comparison information might harm individuals in a state of burnout.

What can be concluded from this dissertation?

All in all, this dissertation indicates that confrontation with social comparison information may harm the well-being of individuals in a state of burnout. Compared to healthy people, individuals in a state of burnout respond with more negative affect to confrontation with unfortunate others. They are also less inspired by successful others, in particular those with a strong dispositional need to compare themselves with others. Individuals in a state of burnout are able to benefit, however, from comparison with self-chosen or imaginary others. It is hereby important that they reflect on those aspects on which they are not doing poorly in comparison with others. For individuals in a state of burnout, the perception of ‘not doing poorly compared with others’, seems easier and is perhaps more important to maintain than the perception of ‘doing better compared with others’. Feelings of superiority are possibly of importance for the development of burnout: Especially among individuals with a reduced sense of superiority, burnout is accompanied by depressive symptoms, .

The findings in this dissertation are important because they brought the intricate relationships between burnout and a broad range of social comparison processes to light. Whether a comparison induces hope and inspiration or frustration and despair depends not only on the level of burnout, but also on the nature of the comparison target (imposed vs. self-generated), the dispositional need for social comparison information, and the specific focus that one applies (self-protective vs. self-enhancing). In general, social comparisons appear to play a substantial part in individuals’ well-being, and therefore deserve attention in scientific research, clinical settings, and everyday life.

